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ATG Interview/ Richard Abel-Part 2

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Against the Grain Interview



RICHARD ABEL — Part 2

The Approval Plan is Born

Interview by **Dora Biblarz** (Arizona State University)

Here we have part two (of three parts) regarding the perspective of the founder of one of the most influential companies in the history of library bookselling, acquisitions and collection development in North America.

ATG: You had just found a new manager to run the Reed College Co-op so you could move to the library bookselling operation off campus. It became Richard Abel and Company, Inc. Richard Abel Bookseller in Los Angeles and San Francisco were rolled back into this new corporation.

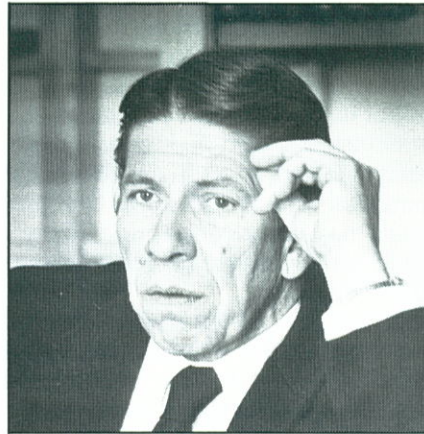
RA: Yes. Now, by this time, we were also starting to work with a lot of the research libraries. Places like Los Alamos and Lawrence Rad Lab, Lockheed Missile and Space, so on and so forth, the Jet Propulsion Lab. About this time, the American News Company went broke. In addition, the old system of wholesalers, like J.W. Stacey came to an end. When J.W. Stacey lost their exclusive monopoly on the sale of scientific books, that gave us an enormous shot in the arm to sell to these scientific and technical -- what are now called special libraries.

ATG: So that suddenly there were no areas of the market that were closed to you.

RA: That's right. We were now able to establish a broad base from which to operate.

Well, then along about that time, the rough foundations of the approval plan were laid. This was done with a guy by the name of Smith, who was then the librarian at Washington State University, in Pullman. We were getting a fill rate, out of inventory we had in our warehouses, of something approaching 80%. So that librarians sending us their typed up lists, or 3x5 forms, could expect something between 80% and 85% of the books to be sent back in a week or 10 days. This was another kind of notable thing that we had done. We had put in inventories.

One day, Smith was on the phone with me about something or other, and he said, just in passing: "How is it that you get such a high rate of fill on our orders to you?" I replied, "Well, when I sit down with the publishers' catalogs to order new titles, I literally count the libraries that I think are going to buy



each particular book. I buy that many copies plus a couple of more for those who might or might not buy. Then, I spread them around between the Portland inventory and the San Francisco office inventory, and the Los Angeles inventory." I continued, "Of course, in Portland because it's the home office, we have the largest inventory; San Francisco and Los Angeles just have working collections and any orders they can't pull from their stock they send to Portland. The completed orders are then sent back to them."

Smith replied, "You mean you can tell what we're going to order?" I said, "Sure." He was carrying on as if it were a mystery. I said, "It's no mystery at all, I've gone to your registrar's office and picked up your catalog and I know that you're offering courses in certain disciplines, and I know that you have graduate courses in these disciplines and so on, and that, therefore tells me that you, by God, are going to have to have books in those fields. You don't have choices. And what's more, I'm going to tell you that you're going to wait anywhere from six months to a year to order that book, because it will

be that long before the reviews appear, and somebody in your faculty comes to you and says, I want this book, and you order the book, and you send me the order and we pick it off our shelves and send it back up to Pullman." I added, "In a real sense you're doing without literature you need for these extended periods of time. And often you're sending me rush orders to make up for this delay." So he said, "Let's talk about this."

I had been planning to be going up to Pullman in a couple of weeks anyway. When I got there, Smith said, "Let's go to my house and have lunch." We sat down at his kitchen table and went over everything we had talked about on the phone. He was one of those guys who was very shrewd and terribly direct. It was always just words of one syllable, no messing around. And as we went through all of this again, it finally occurred to me that I ought to make a proposition to this guy. So I said, "Why don't we set up something like this: I have Don Stave, a librarian, on my staff. I will have Don look at all the new books as they come in, before they go in to our inventory, and I'll have Don send up every book to you which he thinks fits somehow or other into your curricular offerings. Then, you put all these books someplace in acquisitions -- devote some shelves to them -- and you then ask faculty to come in and look at them. I'll let you sit on those books for (I think it was) three weeks. You choose the books you want and those you don't want, just send back to us." And as we were still using typewriters for billing, on 8 1/2 x 11 invoices, I said we'll just call them "approval books" instead of giving them an order number.

ATG: How did you come up with "approval books"?

RA: Because that was an accurate description of what was happening. We were sending the books up for his approval. Anything that he, or his staff, or his faculty didn't approve of, would come back to us.

ATG: You were willing to take the returns, within a reasonable time and just go to someone else with them, or add them to your stock?

RA: They would go back into our inventory, because I knew that some other library would want them. And I knew, too, that a bunch of the books that were rejected by Pullman one day, were going to be ordered later.

ATG: Did you tell Mr. Smith that?

RA: Yes, I did. I was always a pretty candid guy. He simply said, "We'll see."

So as the books would come off the pricing line, Don Stave would go through the carts of new books and pull off those he thought suitable and put them in a pile. The biller would get them the day that we were going to bill — we'd bill the libraries once a week — she'd make up a special invoice that was labeled approval, on which she billed all the books Stave had stacked up. The library at Washington State University agreed that they would send approval books back in a separate shipment; they wouldn't come back like ordinary returns, the dups, defectives and such.

After about six months I went back up to Pullman and asked, "Well, do you want to do this as a steady thing?" and Smith said, "Yes, do it."

Thereupon we went out and started to sell approval plans. But one of the first things we had to do was minimize all the damn paperwork. So we devised the multi-part, 3x5 forms still being used. Now, in those days computers were still a very primitive kind of thing so we had to develop a different technology to print all those 3x5 forms.

ATG: This was in the early sixties?

RA: Yes, very early sixties. There was a thing called a Flex-o-writer, which was an automatic typewriter run with a punched tape.

ATG: So you ran a multi-part form on these?

RA: That's right. At one point we had 22 Flex-o-writers going, all driven by one tape and run through all those machines. The tape would just go from one Flex-o-writer to the next. We had a night shift on, so we'd get the

forms all off for all the libraries that were on approval.

Then, we acquired one of IBM's first 360-30 computers and drove the Flex-o-writers with it. Finally we bought a larger computer and started printing the forms on computer printers. We had a whole battery of them. The computer operators were finally working all night, just to produce the forms because the approval program really, really responded to a need out there in the libraries, so many libraries joined it. It was such a common sense thing. We were sending them things they were going to order anyway, why go through all the old hassle?

Expansion of Richard Abel & Company, Inc.

Then, of course there was the problem of integrating this approval plan with standing orders and books in series. We obviously had to make sure that if a library had a standing order for a particular series, that we didn't send them any books on the approval program. So we put our standing order system up on the computer. Almost all of our libraries had been using us for standing orders, so by this time we had a large fraction of the libraries' standing orders. So we said, "Why don't you give us all the standing orders so that we have better control over whether or not we should send you the book? Because if we don't exclude all books in series you're going to miss many books and conclude we're not doing a good job."

We next ran into the whole problem of the small, out of the way publishers, which would publish the odd book that was terribly, terribly good and terribly, terribly important. We decided we had to include all of that stuff.

You remember in your interview with Fred Gullette for *ATG*, Fred said, this is one of the things we shouldn't have done, that I had some sort of a desire to control the book world. I had no desire to control the book world; it was a natural, logical consequence of trying to make the approval program work as effectively as possible for the libraries.

It was the need to be thorough, because if we don't send a book from the Society for Automotive Engineers for the engineering department then the engineering faculty would tell librarians that the approval plan was simply not working. There is this book, and this

book and this book, all from the Society for Automotive Engineers, you know how important they are, and you're not getting them. Now what kind of a job are you doing? We, therefore, were the ones being criticized for doing a poor job. It was the natural consequence of the logic of the approval plan — it follows just as surely as night follows day that we had to include the publications of small publishers.

And the same can be said of the books published in the English language elsewhere in the world. This was driven by the common publishing practice of co-editions that goes on in the English language-speaking world. It is equally true of English language books published in the Netherlands or in Germany or wherever. The logical consequence was, that we had to start covering those books even when we only were talking about a U.S. approval program. In short, we were saying, "We are going to send you all the books that fit your profile published in the USA." Consider all the out of the way outfits, like Humanities Press that bring in all kinds of books in the English language but don't carry their imprint but that of a variety of non-U.S. publishers, yet they appear in *PW*, they appear in Library of Congress MARC tape -- well, MARC tapes hadn't come along yet, but proof slips.

So, looking at *PW* or *LC*, librarians would say, "Come on, Abel, what are you doing, you're not doing the job, you're simply trying to skim off the cream; you only want to deal with the Wiley books and the Simon & Schuster books and the Random House Books. You don't want to deal with these books listed by Humanities Press." On and on it went, because the guy who ran Humanities Press was not alone in seeing that there was a need for these books in this country.

It was also clear that these people who were importing books like Humanities Press were marking the price up to beat hell. Here was a book that carried a \$10 list price in the UK but he had marked it up to \$25, so he was making money hand over fist. Other publishers did the same thing, so I suppose it was all right. But I fundamentally said, let's quit playing that game because we're going to defeat ourselves, the libraries are going to see that they can buy this book for \$10 and

here we're selling it to them for \$25. Even though this pricing was not our doing, we're going to be hammered for it. So, we started buying those books directly from the UK, from Australia, from Germany, and so on and so forth.

ATG: So now we have the parameters getting defined, like country of origin, language of the book, academic level, subject type, non-subject descriptors, the whole array of series options, all of these things are getting more complex — more criteria, more libraries, more needs that are just arising naturally out of the existing service — you were almost getting carried along on a tidal wave.

RA: That's right, because the logic of the idea has to be carried out until the string is all played out. You can't stop someplace and say, hey, this is enough. You have to carry it through to its logical conclusion.

In the meantime, we had been opening other offices. We opened an office with Jim Cameron in Denver, Colorado, then in Zion, Illinois, to which Fred Gullette transferred out of San Francisco and Aaron Saady moved to cover San Francisco. We hired Lyman Newlin, who had been the buyer for Kroch-Brentanos, to come in to the Zion office. Ultimately I made Lyman my assistant and moved him to New Jersey because we had to have a good interface with the publishers.

ATG: These libraries that you were working with were primarily on the West Coast?

RA: We started on the West Coast but kept moving to the East. You know, librarians transfer around a lot, so the guy who was librarian at San Fernando Valley State College (we helped him build that library from the ground up) moved to the University of Chicago library. He had an approval plan at San Fernando Valley and he wanted to use our services at Chicago.

Origins of the Thesaurus

As the approval plan started to grow it was clear that we had to regularize it. It couldn't be Don Stave walking by a cart of new books, pulling books off and putting them in stacks. That had to

come to an end. So, I put together a list of subject descriptors and other parameters. Then Stave and I worked on it together.

ATG: You make it sound so easy. You can't tell me you just sat down in front of a fireplace and put your feet up and started describing subjects. How did this develop?

RA: There is something else that I was going to bring up in a different connection that has a bearing here. Now we're someplace in the mid-sixties, universities are exploding, and the old university library can't handle all these undergraduates. The notion of undergraduate libraries emerged as the way to deal with this problem. I think that it was for the University of Washington that we put together our first undergraduate library, but if not the first, it was one of the very early ones. It has a huge campus, with 40,000 students, so they experienced the problem earlier than a lot of other institutions. Ken Allen was in Acquisitions there at the time, and we started talking about this problem. He just didn't know how he and his staff were going to find the time to order all these books, and so on and so forth. I said, "Hey look, Ken, this is something we could do for you. You're talking about only 10,000 books, 10,000 separate titles. Now, that's a game I think we can play." He said, "OK, I'll give you a blanket purchase order for 10,000 volumes." We then did some calculating to arrive at an average price of the books which were planned to be all the classics. We were to start back at the *Iliad* and move forward. But since we were using average figures, we agreed that the final prices might be less or more, which we would adjust over time. We sent all the books as separate shipments so both of us could keep track of this program and see where it came out.

I used several of the classic, old bibliographies, because there was no *Books for College Libraries* yet.

ATG: Here's where your background in philosophy, history, and so on fits beautifully.

RA: That's right, absolutely. I went through these mostly at home, in the evening. I can still remember lying in bed, picking through these bibliogra-

phies. Orders would be cut from these annotated lists. Well, we did a creditable job. The faculty were very pleased with it.

The toughest case came at UCLA, because the UCLA library had put together a faculty committee to determine how they were going to go about establishing an undergraduate library. We proposed doing what we had done at U.W. and to start with 10,000 books. If the committee liked what we did then we would go to 50,000 — I'm not now certain of this last number, but I know 10,000 was the beginning number. One of the members was an old classics professor (I don't know if you remember those old classics professors, they were a tough-minded lot.) and after the meeting at which I explained how I was going to go about it, other undergraduate libraries we had put together over the years, and so on. He said to me, "OK I voted for this, but you can bet I'm going to watch every shipment that comes in here every week, and if you're not doing a good job, you're going to hear about it." Well, at the end of 10,000 books, I don't know, it was four or five months later, I went back down and sat down with the committee. The old classics man said, "Young man, you did a pretty good job, we'll go the rest of the way."

ATG: You passed the test!

RA: We passed the test. But out of these experiences in building undergraduate libraries, together with a strong background in history, I know what the great subject fields are, and what was a reasonable distribution between, let us say, history and physics, or literature and mathematics. We simply couldn't send in helter skelter the first 10,000 books that occurred to us, there had to be some balance between various disciplines. So these experiences and my background in history were, I guess, what I depended on the most in framing the approval plan subject list. I obviously repeatedly consulted the Library of Congress Classification system, not their subject headings, because their subject headings, in my judgment are absolutely execrable. But I went to the system and what they said they were including in each one of these numbers. Then, I guess the thing that was of the next greatest utility to me, was a set of books by a man done in the late

19th century, a man by the name of Swan Sonnenschein, I think it's called *The Best Books*. This guy was a kind of polymath of the late 19th century, a bookseller in London, who did some publishing. He had developed a classification system for books that I found terribly, terribly useful in putting together this list of subject descriptors. Subject headings were the first big cut in the approval program: What subjects do you want, what subjects don't you want? All the other descriptors then work on that base, all the other kinds of modifiers fine-tune the subject descriptors.

There was another book, done in the early part of the 20th century, by Bliss, on the principles of the organization of knowledge, upon which I depended heavily. One of the great intellectual tools is the classification of things, and this guy had developed a very good theory of classification which I used. This book proved to be very useful.

ATG: This was for the philosophy of classification.

RA: Yes, that's right. The underlying principles that govern classification, however you do it.

ATG: So then you sat down with these broad categories and were able to say here's how other subjects fit in, and you used the Library of Congress Classification as, perhaps a checkpoint.

RA: Right, but if Swan Sonnenschein departed radically from Library of Congress, I would tend to bias toward the way Library of Congress had done things because most of our libraries were using the LC Classification system, and it would therefore be more comfortable for them than if we used the wide departure of Swan Sonnenschein, who most of them didn't even know about.

The approval plan system was radically revised in the early '70s. I undertook it because we were getting complaints from librarians that an approval program that they had known, for example, in the San Francisco office, was not working the same as one, let us say, run by the Blackwood, New Jersey office, or the Atlanta, Georgia office. It was clear that in order to deal with this problem, we were going to have to radically modify and make more specific and more particular large aspects of the approval program.

ATG: So that you had a more systematic or more similar treatment in each office.

RA: Yes, I thought that by developing greater specificity throughout in the way in which we defined books in the system, we could deal with this problem of consistency. Ultimately we fundamentally moved all the decision-making back to the Portland office. From an internal operating point of view, we would, in the case of the first system, make up all the forms and send them to the various offices. As you know, the approval plan has always had a books/forms alternative. So we would make up a complete run of forms for every library for every book that went through the system each week. The manager of the San Francisco office, or the Los Angeles office, or the Denver office, would then go through all his new books, saying, "OK, I'm going to send this book to this library, but for this one, I'm just going to send the form." The theory was, of course, that the managers who had gone into the library and done their profiling, that is, sat with the library staff to define what books it is they wanted and what books they didn't want, knew best.

We were finding these real disparities in the plans which were causing

our libraries real problems because the approval plan was not the same thing from one place to the next. We were able, with the next revision, to move selection back to Portland thanks to the computer. By this time we had acquired a 360/50 computer and we'd become very clever about how to program it. We had a staff of something like 25 programmers and systems analysts who had truly learned to tame the computer for these purposes. So, for example, by the time the company went down the tubes we had about five million catalog records in MARC form, we had records for I don't know how many years of approval programs, lists of books for undergraduate libraries. We had all kinds of massive databases.

ATG: So that by having one person do the profiling of the book and by having more consistency in the profiling of the libraries you found that the predictability improved?

RA: The predictability from one office to the next became virtually certain.

Coming in the Next Issue — The Company Goes International, Turn-key Libraries, and Conclusion. \$

Bodian's Biblio-Glossary

by Nat Bodian (Publishing Consultant)

1. Biblioclast: One who mutilates or destroys books
2. Bibliogenist: A producer or publisher of books
3. Bibliographer: One who writes about books
4. Biblioklept: One who steals books
5. Bibliokleptomaniac: One with an obsessive impulse to steal books
6. Bibliolater: One with extreme devotion to, concern about, or dependence on books
7. Bibliomania: A passion for collecting books
8. Bibliomaniac: One with an exaggerated liking for acquiring and owning books
9. Bibliopegist: A bookbinder
10. Bibliophag: One who devours books; an ardent reader or bookworm
11. Bibliophile: A lover of books or book collector
12. Bibliophobe: One who fears books
13. Bibliopole / Bibliopolist: A bookseller; sometimes a rare book or second-hand book dealer
14. Bibliotaph: One who hides or hoards books
15. Bibliothec: A librarian